

Voices & Commentary

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Sexism, not career choices, drives wage gap

A letter to the editor this week protests what the writer calls “the myth that pay disparity between women and men is due to discrimination.” Randall Bradley of Council Bluffs writes that he is disappointed in my use in a March 13 column of “that old tired saw that women make 77 percent of what men make.”

He attributes the difference in earnings to women taking time off to raise children and gravitating to areas of a profession that require less training.

I was processing Bradley’s claim when Jim Addy emailed me saying, “Randall Bradley is the one perpetuating a self-centered myth so he need not act nor feel guilt.”

It’s heartening to see men take on other men over sexism. Addy had good evidence that the wage gap cannot be reduced to what Bradley calls “career choices.” The owner of the data analysis firm Mapping Strategies, Addy has been working with the Chrysalis Foundation for Women and the Iowa chapter of the American Association of University Women to examine the gender wage gap in two public-sector



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job classifications — technology and tech support. He looked at jobs in the Des Moines school district and three large technology area education agencies, AEA 267, Heartland and Grant Wood.

His report, just completed in January and not previously made public, is titled “Irony: Gender Pay Inequity among Those Promoting STEM for Women and Girls.” It can be read at www.mappingstrategies.com.

It finds that overall, men make \$13,246 more than women in AEA tech jobs and \$11,561 more in tech support jobs. Though women had more experience — 12.7 years compared with 11.4 years — they were paid on average \$59,500 compared with \$71,000.

In Iowa school districts, though women also have more years of experience, men earn about \$6,000 more. In the Des Moines school district, the technology positions men hold pay on average \$65,061 while the ones women hold pay on average \$51,583.

At AEA 267, the average male tech salary is \$67,409 compared with the average female salary of \$46,287. Many senior women make less than junior men. Age seems to depress wages for women but not for men there.

At Heartland Area Education Agency, the two females making \$52,835 have five years of experience, while the male making \$55,000 has less than one year. A woman with 33 years of district experience makes \$15,000 less than a man with one year of experience.

“More experience for men gets you high pay and for women gets you less,” Addy said. “Explain that in a system that’s generally based on seniority.”

He and the leaders of Chrysalis, the AAUW and state Rep. Mary Mascher, D-Iowa City, asked the director of the

Heartland AEA to explain it. She said earnings are based on experience, but Addy says her study didn’t compare years on the job as his did.

An Iowa Workforce Development study in 2010 identified a \$4,000 wage differential between average male and female IT workers’ salaries. That is consistent with Addy’s findings.

His data are mapped in statistical tables and summarized in the language of regression models and multivariate equations.

But the conclusion is clear: “Technology has been brought into Iowa’s K-12 education domain. Along with technology, many aspects of its culture, apparently including gender pay inequity, has also been adopted.”

And this is 50 years after the federal Equal Pay Act.

“It is hard to dispute,” says Terry Hernandez, the executive director of Chrysalis. “His report just pulls anything subjective out of it.”

Maxine Lampe, the president of AAUW Iowa, calls it an eye-opener: “I’m just appalled,

especially with the technical piece, because Gov. Branstad and Kim Reynolds have been so big on STEM (education). So we certainly want women to be equally paid.”

The report calls on the public sector to play a leadership role. Lampe says one problem is the lack of oversight of area education agencies, other than by local boards, which she says lack expertise in these issues. “We need a promise from the AEAs to take it seriously,” she said — with legislative oversight.

Agencies could be vulnerable to lawsuits by underpaid women under Iowa’s Equal Pay Act, which allows for triple damages, the report notes.

The report calls for the Legislature to do a comprehensive gender pay equity study of government salaries. Hernandez and Lampe would like a plan that would equalize wages within three to five years.

In the meantime, every Iowa employer should be doing some self-examination, and every Iowan should be talking about what it will take to correct indefensible imbalances like these.